

Episode 5: “Dance Our Dances” with L. Frank

Youspeak Introduction:

Jasper: This is Youspeak radio. With generous support from the Dwight Stuart Youth Fund, an intergenerational project by one institute and the outwards archive on Tongva land.

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Episode Introduction:

Jasper: My name is Jasper Chen. I use he and him pronouns. I am a rising high school senior in the Los Angeles area and a queer trans guy. I interviewed L Frank, a Two-Spirit artist, activist, and writer. Much of their work focuses on indigenous identity and indigenous language revitalization. We spoke about L Frank's childhood, their connections with animism and Two Spirit identity, their art, their thoughts on the connections between language revitalization and queerness, and much more. I find L Frank's work and fearlessness in their identity very inspiring, so it was really great to speak to someone I see as a role model.

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L. Frank: I was the protector of the weirdos. Those who had often been on the outs by others, ostracized by others I found them quite charming or friendly or smart or whatever, so I would become friends with them. If you had to have teams, my teams were always the outcasts, and uh, we were happy because we always kicked everybody's butt because we were solid by our uniqueness. Being different isn't always comfortable, so it was a good way to show our strength

Jasper: When I was younger, I used to tell my friends that the people I liked were the people nobody liked, so I really relate to that a lot.

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Interview Begins:

Jasper: My name is Jasper

L. Frank: My name is L. Frank. I am Tongvet Kukamovet, and Ajachmem, and Rarámuri. I am a Hollywood Indian, three tribes.

Jasper: You've talked about being particularly close with your maternal grandparents.

L. Frank: My mother was quite young, so my grandparents were like, “Okay, we'll take care of this child.” In Hawaii, they call it being hānai-ed. I was really fortunate— not fortunate that there was somebody there, but the somebod^{ies} who were there totally got me. From then on, it was pretty hit and miss as to who, who got me. My grandfather was ill, so I was around him all the time. He's the one who bathed me in the morning and taught me to tie my shoes and talked to me about animism. My searching for my indigeneity started before I was even born because I could hear the language. When I got here, there wasn't the language. I was already connected, but no other human being knew I was. I did. They just

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L. Frank: thought I was an odd little kid. I was autistic and these other things, but I was very different from the other kids. I could still see my people. Some people would call them ghosts. I'm saying they're spirits. Where I played, there were 600 people buried there, my tribe, 400 of them were women. So I would come home and talk to my grandmother, and she was not so interested, but my grandfather was exceedingly interested. He started telling me about what I was feeling and gave me specifics in the form of storytelling. I spent almost all my days seated at the foot of his bed while he'd just talk. He only spoke Spanish. He was telling me how animism worked, how we once talked to the animals, but we lost the ability to communicate because of something we had done incorrectly. It really got spurred on with me hearing and seeing people. The first bird I found with a broken wing, we fixed it with Indigenous foods because it would make it strong. You know it would fly again. When I was a little older, three and a half, I realized, "Oh, brown people are not treated well." I realized my grandfather was pretending to be less of who he was in order to please a Caucasian man, and I thought, "Oh, no, no, this is not right." I considered my grandfather a god. He was just this beautiful, brown god, and here he's acting humiliated and sick and weak. He puts his hands on my shoulders, and in Spanish he says, "Mi hija, that's how the gringos want us to be." I looked at him and I thought about it for a quick second, and I reared back and I said, "No," because I thought, "Not my grandfather, not anyone's grandfather." He looked at me, and he had a big smile. He just took my hand and we walked on. I've always thought universally about justice. I don't really see divisions. What I see is injustice. One injustice leads to another. I'm not pleased to say. And my grandmother, she came from a different time period and fought to be thought of in a, in a particular way. I was taking her back down the road to indigeneity, but she loved me nonetheless and supported every single thing. I feel very, very lucky that I had grandparents and that I had those grandparents. My mother and father were a lot of drama, involving guns and knives and things. Just all this drama, because we are Hollywood Indians. I only met my father, when I was five. That was briefly because it was more guns and drama. My paternal side of my family identify as Native, and I was in a family that I identified as Spanish. But I do wish I had been raised there. Things might have been a little more easy because that's where I belonged. When I finally, later in life, remet him, it was a very interesting and wonderful relationship. My mother, I'm not sure she ever got used to me. She was quite the Spaniard and I was quite the Indian, and she was quite straight and I was quite not.

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Jasper: You've talked about being different from other kids. What did that make your elementary and middle school experiences like?

L. Frank: I never quite fit, but I was a protector of the weirdos. Didn't come with a crown or anything. Even from kindergarten on up, even into college, those who had often been on the outs by others, I found them quite charming or friendly or smart or whatever, do I would become friends with them. My teams were always the outcasts, and we were happy because we always kicked everybody's butt, because we were solid by our uniqueness. Being different isn't always comfortable, so it was a good way to show our strength. So that, in ways, it was really good because of that; in others, it was really awful because I still didn't fit the norm as far as education and school and what you wear and what you say.

Jasper: When I was younger, I used to tell my friends that the people I liked were the people nobody liked, so I really relate to that a lot. You've talked a lot about identifying as Two Spirit. Was that one of the things that made you different?

L. Frank: Yes, it always had, but I didn't realize it until I was older and tried to talk about it and everybody was freaked out and I thought, "How can you be freaked out? I've been this way forever?" I was confused at that point. I had just always thought so differently that being Two Spirit wasn't. It was the way I was

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L. Frank: supposed to be, so I never lamented over being Two Spirit. I have seven siblings, and four of us are queer in one form or another. I was just the first in order to shock everybody. It's part of my ability to be oblivious. I didn't take the hate that people gave, because I was already a weirdo. I talked to the spirits, you know? I was already a weirdo because of this. It was just one more thing. Everything that I was doing was correct, so why should I feel bad about, you know, this other element?

Jasper: Did you know other Two-Spirit people when you were younger?

L. Frank: I did; I just didn't know they were. I remember seeing my first one that I knew was because of all of the laughing behind the back and laughing behind the hand. She was what some people would call 'Butch' or 'Dyke.' Men at that time wore big watches. She had the biggest watch I've ever seen. Men at that time would roll their cigarettes in their sleeves. She had a big roll of cigarettes in her sleeves, and men would comb their hair Elvis style. She combed her hair the biggest Elvis hairdo. She was way over the top, but they all loved her. They were always in the center of guys and always laughing. When I saw them, they were strong and powerful and I thought, "Wow, that's attractive."

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Jasper: You've described an experience you had at Alcatraz when you were younger.

L. Frank: In high school, most of my friends were, Iroquois or this or that, different Natives. We banded together and kept trying to run away to Alcatraz, but we didn't make it to the island because our guardians, parents, whomever was in charge of us, kept catching us. They had caught us for running away to peace marches and doing this and doing that, so we never quite made it, but impression, it did make. The Indians did not fade away from history. That, to me, was the most important outcome. Natives awoke and realized we can wake up together. We are no longer afraid. It was tacking back of the fact that Natives in the Americas still exist. We're still in our homelands. Some people had to leave their homelands to come to Alcatraz, but it was an awakening moment. It gave us strength. Standing Rock was the second biggest awakening moment. They're like magical times that cannot be recreated. They can happen again, but they can't be recreated. Alcatraz became a symbol that we refuse to die. We refuse to die. We refuse to assimilate into your world. We refuse to think that what you're doing is right, and we're going to refuse with our cultures. We're going to speak our languages. We're going to dance our dances. We're not going to come in with sticks and stones. We're going to come as ourselves with goodness.

[MUSIC]

Jasper: Something that you've talked about a lot is an experience carving a stone bowl that was rather formative to you. Could you describe that a little bit?

L. Frank: I used to have a friend who never seemed to follow any rules. One day we went to a museum, which was closed, and he made the janitor open it up. It was the first time that I had seen stonework, and all the stonework had the name of my tribe on it. And I thought, "Who's doing this?" And turns out: nobody was. And so I realized that somebody has to. So I got a 100 pound block, and I was artist in residence with the Haida Indians up in San Francisco at the Headlands. The night before I went to work on it, I dreamt it finished. I've never seen an art piece I'm going to do, finished. The day before I actually started working on it, a car ran into it and threw my stone around. And it took me a while to comprehend what was happening. It took me three days before I could carve. But in that carving, the ancestors are the ones who actually made that stonework happen because it's almost perfect. We're human beings. We don't make perfect. I don't make perfect anyway, but this is almost perfect. I didn't know quite how to do it, and the Haida Indians lent me tools and, the stone taught me so much about my people and how they

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L. Frank: work and the tools that they used. When you do something your ancestors do, it is very informative. Because my people are considered extinct and nobody's doing these things, I'm very grateful that the ancestors are stepping up and stepping in and sometimes yelling at me.

Jasper: Do you still participate in, more traditional crafts like that? And do you still feel that sense of connection?

L. Frank: Oh, absolutely. I've made maybe 25, 30 bowls. The beaches in Southern Cal used to be littered with sea creatures effigies in prayers of food and abundance or protection, so I've made countless of those. I'm about to make a stone pot for making the mixture you need to make a canoe. You have to mix asphalt, and pine pitch, and charcoal, and you mix it in a stone bowl that sits in the fire so that the heat is maintained. I helped make the first canoe. It's a sewn, glued steamed canoe in 200 and something, 50, years. Then, I made the second canoe in 268 years, and I'm almost finished with the third canoe in 300 years. Other art forms that I make incorporate aspects of traditional thought. I'm doing an art piece right now and it's about the Island of the Blue Dolphins. The woman, Karana, she sat on the end of an island enclosed by the ribs of a whales, so the winds wouldn't hit her. She was waiting every day for eighteen years or so for her people to come back. I'm doing an art piece about her praying for her people. I'm making 150 little clay people that she's wishing to come back, and while it's not a traditional material, it's still a traditional thought.

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Jasper: One of the things you've been involved with is writing *Acorn Soup*. Can you tell us a little bit about that project and the process of writing that?

L. Frank: It started with magic glasses. I just have an eye problem, so I'm wearing glasses, but I call them magic glasses because I still draw the same way I did in the second grade. The magic glasses allows the drawing to happen. I put them on, and I warm up my hand with some little drawings, and then all of a sudden I'm done. Those drawings actually came because I knew about a lot of different Native cultures, but now I started learning about my culture. Like when we go deer hunting, you only eat deer food for two weeks, and you're not around other humans, so you smell like a deer. When you go on the hunt, you put a deer skin over your head with a deer head on it, and you bend over and with the bow and one hand and the arrows in the other, and now you have four legs, and the other deer think you're a deer. Well, I come from L.A. and I thought, "Yeah, right. Like deer would fall for that." That's how *Acorn Soup* started happening. My deer in there started talking to the deer hunters. I thought, being an L.A. Indian, "Where the hell do you get a deer skin from to put on your head?" So, I did a drawing; it's called "Deer Decoys R Us" because if I want something in L.A., I go to the store. Right? *Acorn Soup* actually was a blend of contemporary clueless, urban Indian with traditional, ancient ways. There's a magazine that I work with sometimes called *News from Native California*, and the publisher was always looking for something on the back cover. I had a pile of these drawings, and the publisher saw them, so he started putting them on the back of his magazine. And he said, "Hey, why don't we make a chapbook?" and I said, "Sure, what's a chapbook?" That's how *Acorn Soup* came to be. On the back cover of *Acorn Soup* my hand is on that very first stone bowl that I made, the large stone bowl. I used to work at a state mental hospital, so I would show all my clients the Marx Brothers films. There's one called *Duck Soup*, one of my favorites. It's ridiculous, so that's why it's called *Acorn Soup*. It comes from the Marx Brothers and me being very, very urban. I have two ISBN numbers, talk about nerdy, because I have another book called *First Families*.

Jasper: Can you talk a little bit about *First Families*?

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L. Frank: I had dreamt it as a child that I would go around to all these different peoples, and I would listen to them and look at their photographs, and they would tell me the stories of their lives the way they wanted to. That was exactly the job. I went to every single tribe, even ones that are considered extinct, crossed California state borders, talked to every tribe that was considered a California tribe. They showed me photos. Some were daguerreotypes or tin types of people dancing. Some showed me photos of when they were indentured slaves, and the Brownie Hawkeye cameras came out. The photographs were just incredibly beautiful, and they just hold so much of the culture. There are stories during the wars of Indian boxers and, Indian musicians and just our lives captured and their lives told by themselves. It should have taken several years to complete. I did it in like six months, and it was, astronomically difficult and rewarding. Each door that I knocked on, the people said the same thing. “We've been waiting for someone to listen to us.” One family, quite elderly, they live on a reservation that's six square miles, and the reservation people are trying to throw them off because they want to build a casino there. The people who are trying to be thrown off took me to a graveyard and said, “These are our parents. We are not adopted. We are from here.” She said, “You go out and you ask all Indians, ‘Who are you? Are you gamblers? Are you this? Are you that, or are you Indians?’” So, all these elders were giving me these little commands and orders to go out, which could only help me grow. It was not comfortable, but they had a place to put their words, and that meant something to me. It's a way that I could honor them. I was given a great gift of honoring them that way.

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Jasper: Can you talk a little bit about Advocates for Indigenous Californian Language Survival?

L. Frank: It's a board that seven Native Californians put together about 25, 26 years ago. Some Natives and non-Natives got together and decided uh to take a look at the condition of Indigenous languages to California. It was pretty bleak. Up in Northern California, every year, they'd lose 10 or 15 fluent speakers. BAM, BAM, BAM. Just every year. In the South, we have maybe a three-quarters of a fluent speaker in one dialect. There are over 200 tribes and about 100 something languages. Some of them are isolates spoken nowhere else. Every 20 miles was a different dialect, so it wasn't easy. We created this language program based on MODIS, so the Indigenous peoples of the world are revitalizing their languages. I also would go around to Australia a couple of times, adopted by the Midewen from Kununurra and up in the Nunavut province, with the Inuit people up there in Noinoctune. What AICLS does, is see where we can help and how to create programs that are actually beneficial to get people actually speaking language, not just learning grammar, not learning how to count and colors, but actually, finding their language. I also created a language program called “Breath of Life Silent No More.” You can't really know who you are unless you can hear who you are, and feel, and have it come through your heart and out your mouth how your people sound and what your prayers sound like in that language. Breath of Life is based on my personal work of trying to find my language buried in museums in the United States and around the world. I spent more times in museum basements than anything. We're trying to direct people to where their language is. They acquire it, and when we teach them how to employ it, bring it back into their tribes. This way they can bury their dead. They can welcome their newborns. They can sing to Creator.

Jasper: You've talked about the concept of being extinct: languages that were considered extinct or tribes that were considered extinct. What does that concept mean to you? Has that been something you think about a lot?

L. Frank: Only and always. Only and always. I am not what it says on my birth certificate. That's a government thing. They decided who we are because they decided we are no longer the other. I'm actually three different tribes with two California tribes. At least here in California, they only let you put down one

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L. Frank: tribe. Which grandmother do I throw out? It's always, "Let go of your people. Let go of your culture. Let go of everything. Let go of your religion. Let go of your language. You don't exist. You don't exist. You are now this." It feels terrible because that's not true. That's what they do in America. Melting pot. Melting pot. Hell, no. If you're waiting for us to assimilate, you can stop. We are not wearing the clothes we would wear. Most of the time, we are not eating the foods we ate. We are not you, and we will never be you, so being extinct is quite painful.

Jasper: Language revitalization matters to me. I'm half Chinese; my family speaks Mandarin. My grandparents immigrated, and my parents don't speak Chinese that well. At some point, I realized I was like when my grandparents are gone and my parents can't speak their language, some of our family stories are going to be lost forever. There are so many stories that my grandparents have that I'll just never be able to experience fully because I can't speak their language, and that was very sad to me, so I took Chinese classes, which, for the record, I was not very good at, but I'm getting there. It matters a lot to me to talk to someone who cares about the issue of language revitalization and understands that because I think it's such a vital thing. Do you think that there's a particular importance to Two-Spirit people in terms of language preservation?

L. Frank: It's actually not preservation, but it's revitalization and reclamation. I simply think that there's an importance to Two-Spirit people in all aspects of our lives. In certain cultures of ours, only they can touch the dead. People see the Sundance that the Plains Indians do, a very severe ceremonial dance, where they grab hold of the muscles in their chest until they rip out. They all danced around a very sacred pole that's been blessed by a Two-Spirit person. It was a Two-Spirit person who gave people like Sitting Bull and others a secret name. If we needed extra hands to feed the village, we were it. If we needed hands to take care of the children, we were it. So Across the board, there is a need for Two Spirit. That's one of the things that Christianity has been trying to and succeeded a long way. They've made our cultures ashamed of us, but our cultural people are beginning to realize that. We are as integral as breathing.

Jasper: Did you find that when you were younger in your cultures, there was less awareness of Two-Spirit people? Do you think that's something that's been brought back a little bit?

L. Frank: There was full-on awareness but how it was dealt with. A friend of mine, who's a little bit older than me, and I'm about to be 72, they have, in their culture, four different genders. His grandmother realized he was a different gender and started teaching him all the her things and the rest of the family were all Christians, and they were railing against it, "No, he has to go to church." And she'd say, "No, she has to learn to do this in order to feed and give the people what they need." You could go around and it was like, "We don't have them here," yet you'd see 'them' everywhere. Nowadays, it's still a big fight, but it's getting better within our own tribes. A ceremony was instituted by a Plains man for people who are returning from war. It was called "the Drying" or the "Wiping Away of the Tears." This man who created that said, "Oh, no, we have done such a mean disservice to our Two-Spirit people." He was told to send it out, so we had one over up in Oakland. It was "the Wiping Away of Tears" that "we are sorry we have done this to you, because you are sacred beings."

[MUSIC]

Jasper: You've been an activist and an artist for much of your life. What direction is that taking nowadays? What are you working on?

L. Frank: I'm working on not being aggravated. What I mean by that is: at this point, I expected more people to step up. I'm 72, and I've seen one and a half, maybe two people step up, so that's aggravating.

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L. Frank: I was expecting more, but that's just my expectations in the long run. I realized that one at a time, we're still here and it's okay.

Jasper: What advice would you give, young queer and trans people today or young, Indigenous and Two-Spirit people?

L. Frank: I was talking to some young transgendered kids. I looked at their name tags and their pronouns were all in English, but they were Hawaiians and people from Mexico and whatever, and I said, "Well, how come you're not using your own peoples?" They all scribbled out the English and they put theirs because the answer is usually, "Oh, well, it's too hard on the others to learn as well." We are no longer thinking of the others and what they need to learn and how long it takes them. We have coddled and coddled and coddled from our place of suffering. Forever. The world is where it's now- the climates, the winds are hot. The oceans are hot. There's no more time for this coddling of anything. "Oh, we'll be careful with you culturally." No. We are going to take care of ourselves. Self-care means language. Self-care means your culture because that's what has fed your people from the beginning of time. I don't care whose people they are. I spent time with the Scottish people, and they tell me, "We take off all our clothes at the right time of celebration year, and we paint ourselves blue and we beat our drums." And I say, "More power to you." If you're going to be overt in your culture, that's what's going to save you and save the next queers that come along because the only way to show pride is to be proudful. Just move forward. Small things, big things, you don't have to have big end results. We never have big end results in our lives. We just get older, and we've done a lot more. Just be proud of everything that you do, and at the end, you'll be able to give advice to younger people.

Jasper: Thank you, that means a lot to me. You're an interesting person who's done a lot of things that I really admire. I really appreciated you talking about not coddling people. I have been out as trans for a very long time, which is like, only like 3 or 4 years, but it feels like forever to me. What happened to me when I was out was it became difficult to be myself because it was so important to be a way where I would be perceived as the way I want to be perceived because that was what would make me safe in society. I can't use the men's restroom if I'm wearing a skirt and the sparkly shirts that I prefer because it just isn't safe most places. It's difficult because you do lose some of your identity when you do that for a while, and I have done it for a while. It means a lot to me that you mentioned that specifically. Thank you for talking to me.

L. Frank: Oh, you are most welcome.

Interview Concludes.

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YouSpeak Outro:

Jasper: This is...

Jasper, Milo, Kelly, Madeline, Charlotte, Ameer: YouSpeak Radio!

Jasper: We are Jasper Chen,

Milo: Milo Drake,

Madeline: Madeleine Lee,

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Kelly: Kelly Hsu,

Charlotte: Charlotte Ly,

Ameer: Ameer Flores.

Jasper: With generous support from the Dwight Stuart Youth Fund, an intergenerational project by One Institute and The Outwords Archive on Tongva land.